

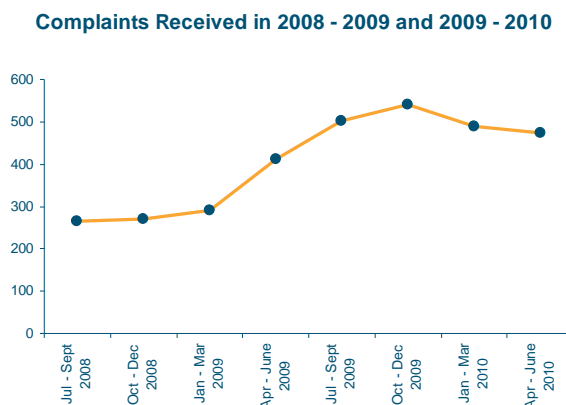
# Significant Issues Impacting the Office

## Complaint Resolution

In 2009-10 there were 2,009 complaints received which was a 62 per cent increase compared to the 1,241 received in 2008-09. This followed a period from 2005-06 to 2008-09 when complaint numbers remained relatively static, ranging between 1,275 and 1,119.

The main reason for the increase appears to be the effect of the Global Financial Crisis (**GFC**). This increase peaked in the October to December quarter 2009-10, after which there was a downward trend resulting in an overall increase for the financial year of 62 per cent compared to the previous financial year. The timing of the GFC has a high correlation with the rise (and subsequent correction) of complaint numbers to the Ombudsman.

The chart below shows the trend in increasing complaint numbers during 2009-10. The increasing trend appears to be across all sectors and is not confined to one public authority.



A number of other factors may also have had a bearing on the increase in complaints. These include:

- A periodic complaint handling survey of public authorities undertaken in 2009-10 that may have prompted an increased awareness of the opportunity to refer unresolved complaints to the Ombudsman;
- The office's outreach programs, in particular the Regional Awareness and Accessibility Program. This Program is designed to

increase awareness of, and accessibility to, the Ombudsman for regional and Indigenous Western Australians. These two groups have traditionally been under-represented in complaint numbers to the office. Complaints from the regions visited in 2009-10 have increased by 217 per cent. During this same period, complaints from regional areas not visited increased by only 38 per cent;

- Some public authorities indicating that they had made changes to their complaint handling systems, including placing a stronger emphasis on advising people to bring their unresolved complaints to the Ombudsman; and
- Greater awareness among public authorities about the Ombudsman as an external review mechanism following the implementation of the Public Sector Commissioner's Circular **2009-27: Complaints Management**.

In early 2008, significant improvements were made to the Ombudsman's organisational structure and processes and have been ongoing since as part of a continuous improvement program. These organisational improvements, combined with scale and scope economies arising from expanded Ombudsman functions during this period, have enabled the increased workload to be managed with a modest increase in resources.

The office will actively monitor complaint numbers during 2010-11 to determine ongoing trends, including undertaking a survey of complainants to gain more information about why people have been bringing complaints to the Ombudsman (and in greater numbers).

## Improving Accessibility

Indigenous Western Australians and people living in regional Western Australia have historically been under-represented in complaints made to the office. The office has implemented strategies to address these issues and will continue them into 2010-11.

One important mechanism for improving accessibility is through regional visits under the office's Regional Awareness and Accessibility Program. These visits involve a range of activities for public authorities including seminars and workshops, visits to regional prisons, workshops for community groups and Indigenous people and complaint clinics.

The office has also introduced a range of new resources which have a specific focus for Indigenous Western Australians. In addition, the appointment of a Principal Indigenous Liaison Officer has assisted to improve access for Indigenous Western Australians to the office.

## Improved Public Administration

Ombudsman offices across Australia are increasingly using a range of tools to improve public administration.

In 2009-10, in addition to improving public administration through the resolution of complaints, the office has undertaken the following activities:

- Administrative improvement projects about significant public sector issues. Key projects were a comprehensive review of complaint handling by public authorities and commencing a review of the management of personal information by public authorities; and
- Assisting public authorities to strengthen their capacity in good decision making, administrative practices and internal complaint processes through advice, guidelines and workshops. The office has developed and conducted workshops for public authorities to support improved complaint handling internally. In 2010-11, the office will be developing and delivering workshops on good decision making.

## Increasing Diversity of Functions

Also in line with Ombudsman offices across Australia, the office is undertaking an increasing diversity of functions. These include a child death review function, an inspection function for telecommunication interception activities, dealing with complaints from overseas students about the termination of their enrolment and undertaking the role of the Western Australian Energy Ombudsman. The office has strong organisational structures and procedures in place to support these functions as well as strong links with other states in Australia with similar roles.